



1946

Save the date

The end of the Second World War saw a generation of Britons, heady with the relief of victory, play their part in rebuilding the nation by heading down the aisle in their droves. *Anne Sebba* reports



Clockwise from far left: GI wives from Pontypool, South Wales, protest to be allowed to travel to join their husbands in the US; Anne Sebba's parents on their wedding day six months after the end of the war, and Helen Vlasto's wedding in 1946

On a cold winter's day early in 1946, Joan Hirshfield, feeling rather old at 26, finally married the man who had proposed to her nine years earlier, Major Eric Rubinstein, now 34. With austerity raging and rationing strictly enforced, Joan had used up all the clothing coupons she could muster on her cream guipure lace wedding dress. For the maids of honour, the only fabric available some six months after the Second World War had ended was a poor quality deep red velvet which, when photographed, appeared transparent. In the subsequent wedding pictures these women were seen unsuspectingly displaying the baggy long johns they had all decided to wear underneath their dresses to keep warm in the unheated wedding venue.

Joan and Eric Rubinstein were my parents, and the story of the transparent velvet was a regular source of laughter during my childhood. I realise now it was an easier story to relate when talking about 'the war' than tales of the atrocities witnessed by my father (a tank commander) after

he crossed the Channel on D-day plus one as part of the Allied invasion that eventually liberated Europe from the Nazis.

But, like many of the 385,000 couples who tied the knot in Britain in 1946 – and who, if still alive, would be celebrating 70th anniversaries this year – my parents' story had been complicated by events. When my father first proposed to my mother she was just 17 and her parents refused to give them permission to marry. In 1939, once war was declared, my mother begged my father to marry her before he left with his regiment, but he declined on the grounds that he might be killed and did not want to leave a fatherless baby should she become pregnant. They lost touch, and my mother eventually became engaged to someone else, only to break it off when she discovered in 1945 that my father was alive after all. Believing all's fair in love and war, she returned the other man's jewellery, then married my father as soon as possible after he was demobbed.

1946 dawned full of hope in Britain. Now that the victorious troops were returning home after almost six years at war, there was a sense that the country, having survived an existential battle against Nazi Germany, must create a better

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world. What most people wanted, as reflected in Labour's landslide election victory of July 1945 and the marriage boom of the following years, was to make sense of the conflict, to prove that civilisation had, in the end, triumphed. What better way to demonstrate the power of love than by getting married and raising a family?

'1946 was when ordinary people began to enjoy themselves again, to feel a better world was in their sights,' explains social historian Claire Langhamer. 'It was a year of pleasure and leisure, characterised by the football league restarting, television broadcasting beginning and a peak in cinema attendance.' The surge in marriages, which began almost as soon as the war ended and continued through to 1949, resulted in the baby-boomer generation – of which I am part – that has grown up with unprecedented security and prosperity, reaping the rewards of our parents' sacrifices.

According to Virginia Nicholson, author of *Millions Like Us*, an account of women's lives during the Second World War, the rush to marry as soon as war was over was driven by nostalgia and a strong desire, shared by both men and women, to return to an idealised life, which they believed had been wrecked, physically and emotionally. The Blitz, she maintains, having struck not just London but the whole country, was a key factor in making the Second World War different from the First, when the home front had been largely unaffected. 'Women identified with home – often a home that had been destroyed – so postwar they urgently wanted to re-create the life they believed their parents had created in the late 1930s,' says Nicholson. Even educated women who had tasted careers were complicit in this desire to return to domesticity. 'They said, "I just want to go back to how things were to make a home like my mother did and have babies."'

Of course, women required a male partner to complete this idyll, which explains why there ➤

◀ was no similar surge after the First World War. Then, with so few men available to marry, a generation of women was left as spinsters, many of whom decided that if they could not be a wife and mother they must construct a new identity, such as becoming a teacher. Not only was the death toll far higher in the First World War, but it was concentrated among young men of fighting age, whereas in the later war, the overall number of casualties was lower and included many civilian deaths from a wide age range.

Among those desperate to create a stable home was 31-year-old Denise Dufournier, a young French lawyer who had worked in the Resistance escorting downed airmen to escape routes as well as finding safe houses for fellow resisters. Betrayed, she was sent to Ravensbrück, the infamous all-women concentration camp, where she witnessed barbarity and torture on an unimaginable scale. But she survived and, immediately upon her release, thin and desperately ill, went to recuperate at a cousin's house in France where she wrote one of the first accounts of Ravensbrück, called *The House of the Dead*. Having recorded for posterity the hell from which she had emerged 'before it had been corrupted in her mind', she married an

Englishman whom she had met a few months before war broke out. As soon as James McAdam Clark, a scientist turned diplomat who had fought in Tunisia, learned that Denise was alive, he resumed contact and the couple were married in Paris in April 1946. 'My mother was never going to marry a conventional Frenchman from her own background,' says her daughter, artist Caroline McAdam Clark. 'Yet the one thing she longed for was normal family life. Having written the book, she wanted to rebuild her shattered life – even to the extent of declining a request to testify in Hamburg about life in Ravensbrück.'

War acted as a social catalyst, bringing many couples together who would never otherwise have met. In 1946 Major Edmund Browne, a Norfolk-born tank commander who was in Germany overseeing the rebuilding of Kiel port, met Paula Wesz, a Hungarian Jewish Auschwitz survivor. Edmund, 31, was a handsome and determined career officer in the 'Black Rats' Tank Brigade who had been shot in the leg while fighting in North Africa. Paula, two years

younger, had been a fashion-conscious dress designer before she was deported to Auschwitz, where most of her family perished.

'They were both unconventional people in conventional clothing,' explains their only son John, Baron Browne of Madingley and former chief executive of BP. Paula, 28 in 1945, shaven-headed and severely emaciated, was on the edge of survival after a year spent as a slave labourer in a munitions factory when she was liberated by the British and sent to a refugee camp in Germany. But her fluency in several languages (German, French, Russian, English and Hungarian) made her extremely useful, and by 1946 she had recovered sufficiently to be given a job as a secretarial assistant to Edmund. 'It was a very

romantic story,' says John. They fell in love almost immediately, but had to wait to get married until Paula had papers – she owned nothing, let alone any documentation to prove who she was – while Edmund had to get permission from his commanding officer to marry. All potential marriages between British servicemen and alien

women required approval, and permission was granted only 'where the reasons for marriage are good and there was no security objection'. The Brownes were finally able to marry in May 1947 in a Hamburg church.

Meanwhile, in Britain, romance often blossomed between the young women living near military camps and the allied servicemen stationed there, whose numbers were in the thousands. In January 1946, the first of almost 100,000 British women and large numbers of children set sail from Southampton, bound for new lives in Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand – the war brides, or 'pilgrim mothers', as one journalist dubbed them. The SS *Argentina*, followed by the

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RMS *Queen Mary*, made repeated voyages throughout the year, often carrying women who had never been to sea before and had no idea of the life that would await them in a new country. At the same time, Rainbow Corner – the US servicemen's club on Shaftesbury Avenue in London, where many of the couples had met – closed its doors on 8 January 1946, marking the end of an era.

Many of the couples heading down the aisle in 1946 did so after the briefest of courtships, but with a robust belief in romantic love that had often been nurtured in letters rather than reality. Former debutante Helen Vlasto would not have met her husband, surgeon Lieutenant Aidan Long, Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, in Portsmouth had she not trained as a voluntary aid detachment nurse once war was declared. However, he was almost immediately posted to Iceland and, just as he was due home on leave, Helen was sent to Egypt. They corresponded



From left: former debutante Pamela McCormick; Denise Dufournier on her honeymoon in Monte Carlo, and couples dancing at the Rainbow Corner US servicemen's club

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regularly. When Helen was demobbed in 1946, she experienced an acute sense of loss now that the urgent work that had given her life meaning had been removed. Trying to re-create the excitement of war, she briefly took a job as an air

hostess. Finally, Aidan was also demobbed and they married in November 1946.

On balance, those who married in the immediate postwar years displayed a survivor mentality. The popular 1945 film *Brief Encounter* acted as the conscience of a generation, ensuring that marriages were marked by a strong sense of duty. The feeling was that having experienced unimaginably harsh times during the war, couples were not going to let small difficulties derail them now. But the marital knots tied in the immediate postwar period were often put under intense strain.

In June 1946, newlyweds Pamela and David McCormick, unable to find

work, decided they should make a fresh start in the US. The young couple had met briefly in 1940, but came from very different social worlds and, as Pamela said afterwards, ‘I don’t think either of us realised that we were two very different people from the ones who had had such a circumspect juvenile romance five years before.’ David had spent three years as a prisoner of war, often close to starvation, while Pamela, suffering constant stress over David, had had another love affair that went wrong, resulting in a breakdown. Arguably, neither was in a fit state to embark on marriage, yet both sets of parents believed ‘matrimony will

prove the best doctor’. It didn’t. When life in Chicago failed to work out, they returned to England, took up farming and eventually separated after 25 years together.

Their marriage was in many ways emblematic of the difficulties couples faced, not knowing who to turn to for help and advice. 1946 was also a peak year for divorce petitions, as many couples who had been separated by war couldn’t adjust to living together again, or had met

1946: THE YEAR THAT...

- **David Cameron’s grandfather Donald Cameron married his mistress Marielen von Meiss-Tauffen.**
- **Rosalind Maud Cubitt, mother of Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, married Major Bruce Shand.**
- **Actor Roger Moore married his first wife, ice skater Doorn van Steyn.**
- **Patricia, second Countess Mountbatten of Burma, married John Knatchbull, seventh Baron Brabourne.**
- **Eastenders actress Edna Gorring married director Alexander Doré.**

new partners during their time apart. The subsequent number of divorces granted in 1947 was not surpassed until 1971. It was in recognition of these difficulties that the Marriage Guidance Council, founded in 1938, became the National Marriage Guidance Council in 1946, with some government money to support its counselling work.

Perhaps not surprisingly, record numbers of men who got married in 1946 were divorcés, often in their 30s or 40s, which as Claire Langhamer points out, is indicative of the endearing optimism of the time. The institution of marriage was not being rejected, simply individual marriages. The overriding belief was that next time would be better. Marriage was seen as central to the rebuilding of Britain, part of the programme for national reconstruction, with the onus always on women to make it work. And mostly, they did. ■
 ■ *Les Parisiennes: How Women Lived, Loved and Died in Paris from 1939-49 by Anne Sebba will be published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson in July*